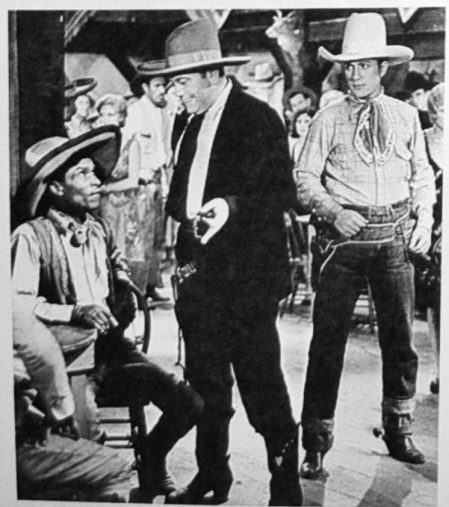
STEVE CLEMENTE UNSUNG AND OVERLOOKED

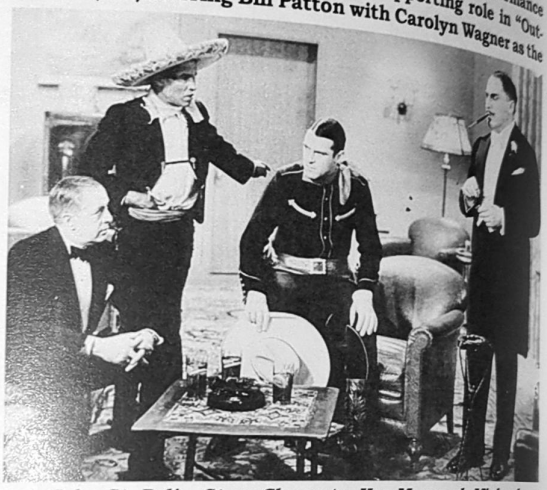
by Samuel Claesson (and Boyd Magers)

One of Hollywood's most overlooked actors goes by the name of Steve Clemente. Although he's known by mainstream audiences for his role as the witch doctor who kidnaps Fay Wray in "King Kong" ('33), he was one of the more prolific Hispanic actors in the history of Westerns. He appeared in 47 of them, almost always as a villain, and usually uncredited. His primary claim to fame was as a brilliant knife thrower who acted as a double for high-profile actors in scenes that involved throwing knives, axes, or shooting arrows at co-stars. He never missed his target, and he was paid a higher salary than most actors for this dangerous gig. He wasn't merely a gimmick though. He was actually a very good actor in his own right. In fact, a lot of his roles didn't involve knife throwing. In addition to his talents, he broke a lot of barriers for his community. He was an icon in Westerns, and he should be remembered as such.

✟ ✟ Steve Clemente was born as Estaban Clemento Morro in Tonichi, Sonora, Mexico on November 22, 1882, and was said to be of Yaqui, Navajo, and Mexican descent. His parents were murdered when he was 11 years old, so the orphaned child lived with his aunt in rural Arizona where he'd eventually earn citizenship. He grew up caring for horses at a nearby ranch where he earned only $15 a year. He'd often hurl objects at rodents, which helped him become great with targets. His cousin, who had an extensive criminal record, gave him his first blade. He learned knife throwing from Juanito Dollinger, who helped him perfect his technique. Steve was actually a kind, hardworking person. In his later years, newspapers would fabricate stories about him having been a scout for Poncho Villa and a rifleman as a way to garner publicity. In the 1910s, Steve was hired to do an act at Buffalo Bill's Wild West, a popular traveling act. Clemente spent months traveling across the country with this act and others. He could throw anything from knives to miner's picks with outstanding accuracy. One trick never seen duplicated was strapping a small target to his partner's chest and throwing a half dozen knives into this target. Clemente was a talented trick roper and was one of the Trick roping contestants at the first Calgary Canada Stampede in 1912. He arrived in Hollywood where John Ford saw his skills and offered him a contract with Universal Studios. The four years he spent with the studio were prosperous. He appeared in John Ford's "The Secret Man" ('17), "The Scarlet Drop" ('18), "Hell Bent" ('18), and "Sure Fire" ('21). He did a lot of Westerns with Jack Hoxie as well, who insisted on co-starring him as much as he could. He even got Steve his first top-billed role in "The Double O" ('21). Sadly, many of these are lost films. Eventually, Steve realized he could earn more freelancing than as a contractee. His $30 a week at the studio was laughable compared to the offers he was getting elsewhere. He left the studio in 1919, which is when his career took off. Since he wasn't bound by contracts, he did several films a year. He portrayed cowboys, soldiers, Indians, cowpunchers, railroaders, circus performers, villains, and, of course, knife throwers. And he portrayed them well! He appeared in Jack Hoxie's "Lightning Bryce" serial in 1919. THE LEXINGTON HERALD wrote his performance "was without parallel." He had a supporting role in "Outlawed" ('21) starring Bill Patton with Carolyn Wagner as the leader of a rival tribe. It was a performance praised by THE TACOMA DAILY LEDGER, who said Steve was "one of the best Western heavies we have seen...when it comes to a fight, oh boy he's there." In the days when there weren't a lot of roles available for ethnic actors, Steve still had a bevy of roles to choose from. His heritage allowed him to portray Mexicans, Indians, Africans, etc. The best part was...he earned more than many of the stars in Hollywood. After marrying his longtime girlfriend, Cuca Arebalo, his career cooled. The newlyweds settled at 1448 Silver Lake Boulevard in L.A. and invested in property. He was still involved in knife and ax throwing, but usually behind the cameras as a consultant or coach. He even taught John Wayne and Wallace Beery the craft while on the sets of "The Big Trail" ('30) and "The Man From Dakota" ('40). In 1935 he was featured with his impalement act on the Tim McCoy Wild West Concert for Ringling Brothers Circus. He'd double for actors as well, which was an easy gig. Since he was one of three knife throwers in Hollywood, he had the freedom to choose his pricing. He charged $15 to $100 to throw at an actor depending on the actor's fame. By the '40s Steve was one of the wealthiest men in Hollywood, owning several houses and a lot of land. His last collaboration with John Ford was in "Stagecoach" ('39) when he decided to part ways with the industry. After his wife suddenly died, he resumed touring the country in an act involving two women who'd stand beneath targets where he'd throw deadly weapons without ever missing his target. In his last interview on April 2, 1949, he was asked about his secret



Steve Clemente, Richard Cramer, Jack Perrin in "45 Calibre Echo" ('32).



John St. Polis, Steve Clemente, Ken Maynard, Michael Visaroff in "King of the Arena" ('33).

to throwing at his targets. He replied, "... 27 feet is the farthest you can throw with accuracy." ⚜ ⚜ Steve Clemente died of a cerebral hemorrhage May 7, 1950 at the age of 67. He's buried beside his wife at Evergreen Cemetery. His legacy includes having appeared in at least 47 known Westerns and being the first successful onscreen actor of Hispanic descent, as well as one of the first in Hollywood to achieve such prosperity. Sadly, it seems most of the Westerns he did are either lost or of poor quality.

WESTERNS AND SERIALS OF STEVE CLEMENTE

"Secret Man" ('17) Harry Carey
"Hell Bent" ('18) Harry Carey
"Scarlet Drop" ('18) Harry Carey
"Lightning Brice" ('19) Jack Hoxie (serial)
"Thunderbolt Jack" ('20) Jack Hoxie
"Cyclone Bliss" ('21) Jack Hoxie
"Outlawed" ('21) Bill Patton
"Sure Fire" ('21) Hoot Gibson
"The Double C" ('21) Jack Hoxie
"Two Fisted Jefferson" ('22) Jack Hoxie
"Forbidden Trail" ('23) Jack Hoxie
"Crashin' Through" ('24) Jack Perrin
"Fast and Fearless" ('24) Buffalo Bill Jr.
"Trigger Fingers" ('24) Bob Custer
"Rainbow Trail" ('25) Tom Mix
"Riding Romance" ('25) Al Hoxie
"With Davy Crockett at the Fall of the Alamo" ('26) Cullen Landis
"Chip of the Flying U" ('26) Hoot Gibson
"Wings of Adventure" ('30) Rex Lease
"The Big Trail" ('30) John Wayne
"Phantom of Santa Fe" ('31) Norman Kerry
"Lariats and Six Shooters" ('31) Jack Perrin
"Lightning Warrior" ('31) Rin Tin Tin (serial)
".45 Calibre Echo" ('32) Jack Perrin
"Riders of the Desert" ('32) Bob Steele
"Mystery Ranch" ('32) George O'Brien
"Guns For Hire" ('32) Lane Chandler
"Tex Takes a Holiday" ('32) Wallace MacDonald
"The Golden West" ('32) George O'Brien
"Clancy of the Mounted" ('33) Tom Tyler (serial)
"Three Musketeers" ('33) John Wayne (serial)
"Gallant Fool" ('33) Bob Steele
"King of the Arena" ('33) Ken Maynard
"Fighting Ranger" ('34) Buck Jones
"Viva Villa!" ('34) Wallace Beery
"Range Riders" ('34) Buddy Roosevelt
"Fighting Through" ('34) Reb Russell
"Five Bad Men" ('35) Noah Beery Jr.
"Vigilantes Are Coming" ('36) Bob Livingston (serial)
"Sunday Round-Up" ('36) Dick Foran (short)
"Land Beyond the Law" ('37) Dick Foran
"Hills of Old Wyoming" ('37) William Boyd
"It Happened Out West" ('37) Paul Kelly
"Hawaiian Buckaroo" ('38) Smith Ballew
"Cowboy and the Lady" ('38) Gary Cooper
"Stagecoach" ('39) John Wayne
"Gay Caballero" ('40) Cesar Romero
"Adventures of Captain Marvel" ('41) (serial)
"Valley of the Sun" ('42) James Craig

Frank Rice, Buck Jones, Steve Clemente, Ward Bond, Art Mix, Frank Ellis in "Fighting Ranger" ('34).

WHY BUDDY ROOSEVELT WASN'T JOHN WAYNE

As an historical sidelight, it's interesting to note Wayne Lone Stars nearly starred former silent cowboy Buddy Roosevelt. Possessing a good voice, Buddy made the transition into sound fairly well, starring in a couple of independents in the early part of the decade. But bad luck plagued him. In '33 he was all set to sign a contract with Trem Carr (who had produced some of his silent starrers) for the Lone Star/Monograms. According to Buck Rainey in HEROES OF THE RANGE, Roosevelt's sister told him Buddy's wife, Frances, "blew up" at producer Paul Malvern just as Buddy was ready to sign the contract. Her tantrum nixed the deal and eventually caused a divorce. Carr went on to sign Wayne. Buddy eventually got his own series in '34 in four Victor Adamson (Denver Dixon) produced and directed Superior Pictures that were totally poverty-budget and *far* from "superior".

D'ja know:

Contrary to what many writers report, B-Western badman Warner Richmond (1886-1948) was not born in Virginia. He was born in Racine, WI. His father, also Warner Richmond, was born in Virginia. Richmond's only child, a son, was also named Warner Richmond. Richmond spent the final two years of his life as a patient at the Motion Picture Hospital.

Some film historians insist badman LeRoy Mason (1903-1947) was married to actress Rita Carewe and Carewe was Mason's surviving spouse. Research reveals Carewe was born in NYC on September 9, 1909. Carewe and Mason wed in 1928. Carewe died on October 23, 1955, eight years after Mason's demise. However, Mason's California Certificate of Death reveals his surviving spouse was one Bernice Mason, age 27.

Walter Miller, often referred to as "King of the Silent Serials", reportedly was the first actor to be paid the then princely sum of $1,000 per week.